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# Challenges to the Implementation of Youth Participatory Action Research in a University–Middle School Partnership

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The problems facing middle schools in the U.S. are myriad, ranging from achievement gaps and inequality (Charles, 2011; Downey & Gibbs, 2010; Farkas, 2004; Whitmire & Bailey, 2010) to the negative repercussions of a culture of high stakes testing (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008; Perlstein, 2007; Valenzuela, 2000; Valenzuela & Jaramillo, 2005) to a developmental mismatch between adolescents and their school environments (Eccles et al., 1993). Solutions to these problems are typically proposed by politicians and school boards, people who rarely have occasion to sit in an actual classroom, and convincing evidence of progress in relation to these challenges is often lacking.

One perspective largely missing from discussion of the most serious issues facing schools and how to address them is that of the students themselves. Many reasons can be surmised for this circumstance, not the least of which being that their opinions are not asked for (Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010), as well as the fact that young adolescents may have underdeveloped critical thinking skills (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010) and limited understanding of effective means of influencing their school settings. Yet the exclusion from the discussion of those who are most affected by school conditions is a glaring omission; students should be able to contribute essential perspectives on the issues they experience firsthand every day.

This paper examines a university–middle school partnership established for the purpose of helping student participants develop their capacities to express themselves effectively and engage in social action in their Southern California middle school. The group employed participatory action research (PAR), which Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy (1993) describe as “a form of action research in which professional social researchers operate as full collaborators with members of organizations in studying and transforming those organizations” (p. 177).

PAR facilitators typically seek to enhance participants’ ability to formulate problems and hypotheses, to acquire and analyze data, and to then synthesize and apply findings (Whyte, Greenwood, & Lazes, 1991). Key features include collaboration between researchers and community members; incorporation of local knowledge; use of theories, methods and information that participants jointly find relevant; the learning of general lessons from specific cases; and making links between research and social action (Greenwood et al., 1993).

PAR partnerships with young adolescents (here referred to as youth PAR or YPAR) have typically been limited to social justice-oriented programs outside of school (Ozer & Wright, 2012). In these instances, Ozer et al. (2010) explain that adaptation of typical PAR processes to YP contexts is required to

reflect the diminished power of youth in adult-supervised settings...Core processes of youth PAR involve the training of young people to identify major concerns in their schools and communities, conduct research to understand the nature of the problems, and take leadership in influencing policies and decisions to enhance the conditions in which they live (London et al. 2003). Key features include an emphasis on promoting youth's sense of ownership and control over the process, and promoting the social and political engagement of youth and their allies to help address problems identified in the research. (p. 153)

Though implementation of YPAR in schools has been relatively infrequent, the school setting is in many ways ideally situated to host YPAR as it “enables the inclusion of a large and diverse number of youth not served by community programs, potential impact on a key developmental setting, and building upon a preexisting network of teachers, students, and district stakeholders” (Ozer & Wright, 2012, p. 269). School-based YPAR can educate young people in their capacity to take responsibility for shaping their own school environments. In addition, many aspects of YPAR are ideally suited to young participants' developmental needs. For instance, in a review of the implications of brain research for teaching young adolescents, Wilson and Horch (2002) recommend many practices typically found in YPAR, such as project-based units of study, peer collaboration, problem-based learning in which students seek answers to their own questions, and the pursuit of multiple ways of solving problems. Despite these affordances, researchers interested in bringing YPAR to schools have few examples to look to for guidance.

This paper's critical account of a case of YPAR in a university–middle school partnership can provide an important perspective on limitations to undertaking YPAR within these environments. As Malone and Hartung (2010) note, transparent descriptions of positive and negative outcomes are often overlooked in literature on children's participatory projects, and Naker, Mann, and Rajani (2007) assert that more openness regarding the tensions and contradictions that participants grapple with can be of great value. Such open accounts can provide potential facilitators of YPAR with the insight to identify and prepare for problems long before they derail a project, helping to ensure not only that efforts do not go to waste, but also that these efforts do not unintentionally cause harm to the communities they are meant to serve. In particular, this paper seeks to answer the following questions regarding YPAR in a university–middle school partnership:

1. What characteristics of student participants need to be negotiated in order to facilitate engagement?
2. What facilitator-related practices undermine the intended benefits of YPAR?

## Theoretical Framework

This paper focuses on facilitator- and student participant-related challenges likely to arise in university–middle school YPAR partnerships. In this section, I explore core facilitator-related challenges that have been found to arise in relation to power differentials with student participants, such as the need for a balance between strong leadership and collaboration, the need for facility with group dynamics, and complications inherent in facilitators’ status in relation to the middle school. I will also examine key young adolescent participant-related challenges, including developmental issues as well as complications in the empowerment of young people. .

Issues manifest in various ways as facilitators attempt to help young people adapt to the shared

Though facilitators may seek to act as allies to young participants, power differentials come into play as adults are typically viewed as authority figures, particularly in cases of white facilitators working with nonwhite adolescents (Nygreen, Kwon, & Sánchez, 2006).

decision making that is characteristic of PAR practices. Though facilitators may seek to act as allies to young participants, power differentials come into play as adults are typically viewed as authority figures, particularly in cases of white facilitators working with nonwhite adolescents (Nygreen, Kwon, & Sánchez, 2006). In addition, the school context is not inherently conducive to such power sharing, as young people’s voices are normatively excluded in this setting (Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011). For these reasons, it is essential for facilitators

to have skill at building trust and relationships with young adolescents, by such practices as investing significant amounts of time, taking a gradual approach, valuing the young person’s viewpoint, and maintaining room for fun (Sipe, 2002).

Facilitators attempting to foster participation must simultaneously provide strong leadership, for such leadership “is essential to the successful establishment of an egalitarian decision-making body”; any attempts to avoid such leadership can lead to a kind of “tyranny of structurelessness” that causes the group to stumble and lose time due to lack of direction (Gruber & Trickett, 2005, p. 368). This leadership must be engaged in a fashion that supports the development of positive group dynamics (Minkler, 2004); several projects note challenges in this area as a reason for projects falling short of their intended aims (Ozer et al., 2010; Wilson, Dasho, Martin, Wallerstein, Wang, & Minkler, 2007).

As YPAR facilitators negotiate the balance between strong leadership, group dynamics, and collaboration, they must also be aware that their own cultural practices can inadvertently have a negative impact upon young adolescents’ participation (Duckett, Kagan, & Sixsmith, 2010; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009), for even those who seek to empower young people may partake in their marginalization (Phillips, Berg, Rodríguez, & Morgan, 2010). This may be particularly the case when differences of opinion arise. As Duckett et al. (2010) observe, if participatory child-centric work “results in the pitting of children’s interests and rights against those of adults then we might find that child-centric research is doomed to failure at worst and considerable messiness and frustration at best” (p. 177).

Facilitators' relationship to the school also impacts the implementation of YPAR. Those facilitators who are employed by the school may have a tenuous (i.e., nontenure) position and may therefore be disinclined to rock the boat (Ozer et al., 2010; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). On the other hand, outside researchers may face skepticism and distrust from community members who take issue with the perceived differential benefits the researchers receive in such forms as grant money or an expanded list of publications (Minkler, 2004).

A complement to many of the challenges discussed above comes from viewing YPAR from the perspective of young participant-related challenges. Given PAR's affiliation with a critical race theory approach of privileging participants' experiences as a form of truth (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009), empowerment of participants in the process is a core concern (Gruber & Trickett, 1987; Riger, 1993; Zimmerman, 2000). Still, young adolescents' developmental stages may be mismatched to the middle school environment (Eccles et al., 1993), as well as to YPAR. Transferring power to middle school students can be difficult due to maturity issues that lead to distracting behaviors and dispositions such as ostracizing and putting down peers (Wilson et al., 2007), disrespect (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010), and constant goofing around (Ozer et al., 2010). Monitoring and assessing the quality of young people's participation in YPAR thus poses several challenges, for seemingly off-task behaviors might be the norm for students at particular developmental stages and in particular school cultures.

YPAR projects often struggle to promote the critical consciousness of young participants "because the methods used are not well matched to the developmental needs of their participants" (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010, p. 67). YPAR facilitators should know how to support young adolescents' school-related developmental needs, such as their physical needs for movement, rest, change of activity, and nutrition; their intellectual need for learning activities that are actively involving and related to immediate interests; their social needs for acceptance, peer relationships, regulation, and independence; and emotional needs for attention and understanding; to name only a small sample (Salyers & McKee, 2007). Although young adolescents' capacity to use higher level cognitive strategies is typically on the rise (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997), young adolescents mature at differing rates (National Middle School Association, 2003), and though some may be ready for the most challenging of YPAR tasks, others may lack analytic and critical thinking skills, and may be generally resistant to writing (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010), which "begs the question of whether these students lack stage readiness" (Wilson et al., 2007, p. 255), having not yet attained a level of development suitable to the tasks. Young adolescents may also tend to target immediate solutions rather than root causes (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010), having a need to see concrete progress related to their efforts in order to avoid losing interest (Ozer et al., 2010). As a result of their prior experiences in school, young people may struggle to understand the validity of the idea that facilitators might not have all the answers, and that the students themselves are to act as experts and coexplorers. Each of these inclinations may necessitate careful introduction of YPAR processes in order to make young adolescents comfortable with YPAR's focus on longer term transformative solutions as opposed to surface-level amelioration of concerns.

In short, though there is much reason for optimism regarding the potential benefits of YPAR in middle school settings, this optimism must be tempered by realistic assessments of the inherent

characteristics of all parties, both facilitators and participants, characteristics that can create obstacles to the effective implementation of such projects. The following sections of this paper will use the case example of a university–middle school YPAR partnership to provide concrete examples of the ways such characteristics can inadvertently impede the progress of YPAR projects.

## Methods

### Site and Participants

In this study, university researcher-facilitators organized a YPAR project at a middle school here referred to as “Haddon Intermediate” (Note: All place and participant names used in this study are masked). The team of six researcher-facilitators consisted of five doctoral students, including the author and one other European American male, three Asian American women, and a female European American university professor who took the role of lead facilitator. The professor and all but one of the doctoral students hailed from the university’s school of education, in a program that focuses heavily on issues related to child development and inequality.

Haddon Intermediate is a large, majority-Latino middle school located in an urban area of Southern California. It has approximately 1000 students in grades 6, 7, and 8, all of whom are enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program, and 97% of whom are Hispanic. Haddon Intermediate had recently been identified as in need of turnaround because of an entrenched culture that was deemed by the staff to be unsafe and not conducive to learning. At the time of the YPAR project, the newly hired principal was in the midst of implementing a range of changes to transform the culture of the school, and he thus welcomed the assistance of the university cohort via the YPAR project.

In weekly 90-minute sessions over a two-month period during the 2013 fall term, seven female and seven male middle school students (four in sixth grade, six in seventh grade, and four in eighth grade) were excused from their classes to work with the visiting university team. These students were chosen by the principal to participate in “the Haddon Project” because he deemed them influential in the school, either for being club leaders and high academic performers, or for contributing to delinquent behaviors. This latter group made up at least a third of the participants. These were students who had been regularly suspended and were presently required to check in and out with each teacher and the principal every day.

### Project Overview

Weekly meetings at the middle school proceeded in a semistructured fashion, with targets and timelines emerging over time. The core content of each of the nine meetings is summarized in Table 1. In the early weeks, student participants broadly considered problems around the school, such as the unclean condition of the bathrooms and issues of being disrespected by teachers and security guards. Ultimately, the group narrowed their attention to the topic of lunch, self-selecting themselves into two groups. The “Lunch group” would focus on improving the quality of the food, and the “Activities group” would focus on regaining permission to use the field for activities during the lunch period. Both groups collected data on classmates’ perspectives and shared them with stakeholders, ultimately achieving their goals of enacting change. The Lunch group shared students’ perspectives on school lunch offerings with the district’s nutritionists,

who then made adjustments accordingly, and the Activities group interviewed the principal regarding lunchtime activities, negotiating the reinstatement of privileges and taking the responsibility to disseminate information on how students could avoid losing these privileges again.

Table 1

*Meeting Content*

Week	Meeting content	
1	Ice breaker and discussion of problems in the school in need of fixing	
2	Discussion of ground rules, researchable questions, evidence, potential research topics	
3	Discussion of evidence collected and possible research topics Students self-select into two groups focused on the topics of greatest interest to them: 1. <i>Activities</i> : a group focused on improving lunchtime activity privileges 2. <i>Lunch</i> : a group focused on improving the menu	
4	<i>Activities group</i> : Meeting with principal to discuss lunchtime activity privileges	<i>Lunch group</i> : Share peer interview HW findings. Design student body food preferences survey
5	<i>Activities group</i> : Discuss ways of disseminating info on new lunchtime rules to student body  <i>All</i> : Scaffolded peer survey practice activity	<i>Lunch group</i> : Further develop food survey, prepare to interview food service personnel
6	<i>Activities group</i> : Discuss ways to keep lunchtime privileges	<i>Lunch group</i> : Final preparations for school kitchen visit
	<i>All</i> : Tour of school kitchen, informal discussion with personnel	
7	<i>All</i> : 1. Pep talk intended to reinforce buy-in for all student group members 2. Look at examples of bad surveys, revise surveys for student body accordingly 3. <i>Lunch</i> and <i>Activities</i> group members pair up to test out their surveys on one another	
8	<i>All</i> : Look at preliminary survey results, discuss findings, prepare to share findings with principal and other stakeholders in final meeting  <i>Activities group</i> : Write script for filmed presentation about survey results and lunch rules	
9	<i>Activities group</i> : Begin at regularly scheduled time, give presentation sharing survey results with principal and other staff to firm up terms	<i>Lunch group</i> : Arrive early to prepare their presentation. Give presentation to principal, district-level nutritionists, and central kitchen

for lunch activities. Film a presentation of survey findings and rules to be shown during homeroom

administrators on findings from lunch survey

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The researcher-facilitators (from this point forward referred to as “facilitators” or as the “university team”) debriefed after each of the sessions and made future plans during discussions that took place at three distinct times every week: (a) on the drives to the site, when the discussion focused on the day’s plans and on refreshing memories regarding what had transpired previously; (b) on the drives back from the school site, when discussion focused on what had transpired and what needed to happen in the following week; as well as (c) during university team meetings that took place on the day following each school visit, which mingled debrief and planning with a focus on bigger picture issues in relation to the philosophy and practice of YPAR.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Primary data came from three sources: field notes, facilitators’ written responses to open-ended survey prompts, and students’ responses to Likert-scale survey items. Additional data came from correspondence, handouts, and other documents related to the day-to-day activities of the YPAR, as well as photos taken during the Haddon visits.

Throughout the process, I took three different kinds of field notes: notes taken during middle school YPAR meetings, independent post-middle school visit reflection notes, and notes taken during weekly university team meetings. I took the notes from middle school YPAR meetings in real time as a running record with personal commentary embedded, and I expanded on these notes following the meeting with further clarification and reflection. Approximately once every two weeks I also took post-Haddon visit notes for the purpose of reflecting on the bigger picture of implementing YPAR in this particular context. Notes regarding the discussion that took place during weekly university team meetings were taken in real time; this discussion and these notes served as a way of checking my experiences and interpretations against those of my colleagues. At the conclusion of the YPAR project, I compared all of my field notes with field notes taken by three of the five fellow facilitators in order to gain multiple perspectives and to check for accuracy and omissions.

I collected participants’ perspectives on the YPAR project via two surveys. I administered the first survey to university team members shortly before the final meeting at the middle school. It consisted of two open-ended questions regarding challenges faced during the implementation of YPAR. These questions were:

1. As we have facilitated YPAR at Haddon, what challenges have been most salient to you? You may share your thoughts on any aspect of the process, including challenges related to working with these students, in this context, on this timeline, and/or anything else.
2. If you were to do this again, what would you do differently?

Though practical scheduling issues and the limitations of our arrangement with the school precluded one-on-one interviews with students following the conclusion of the project, I was

able to collect data on students' perspectives via a survey administered to the middle school participants a few days after the final YPAR meeting. This survey consisted of 28 Likert-scale items in which students could express their feelings regarding their experience with the YPAR project and its value to them. All but two of the 14 YPAR participants were available to step out of class to take the survey on the day that it was administered.

Analysis evolved through three distinct phases. In the first phase, I reviewed all field notes and responses to the open-ended questions for an overall sense of the data. Salient statements were underlined in a preliminary round of *in vivo* coding intended to allow themes to emerge. During the second phase, I revisited the notes and identified patterns and recurring themes. Data were reorganized into blocks consisting of all notes on each particular theme, and codes were refined accordingly. Open-ended survey data were similarly coded and sorted. In the final phase, I viewed the blocks of theme-related data in relationship to one another and also in relationship to the common tensions identified in the existing literature on the challenges of implementing YPAR. Through this iterative process of visiting and revisiting the data, I was able to make refinements to the codes as I identified overarching findings regarding the obstacles in implementing YPAR.

As the university team and middle school students worked together to address problems within the middle school, tensions and challenges became evident in different areas of the partnership.

I presented my initial observations and conclusions to the university team to (a) check for accuracy and (b) seek confirmation and further illumination of challenges faced in the implementation of YPAR by individual participants and the group as a whole. I then analyzed field notes and transcripts from these sessions for the confirmation or disconfirmation of initial patterns and conclusions identified in prior analysis of field notes, responses to open-ended questions, and survey data.

## **Results**

As the university team and middle school students worked together to address problems within the middle school, tensions and challenges became evident in different areas of the partnership. Frank examination of such challenges and tensions can help other potential facilitators of YPAR identify and prepare for problems long before they derail a project, ensuring that efforts do not go to waste.

The following sections identify and examine challenges that arose in the areas of student-related characteristics and facilitator-related practices. To the extent possible, challenges stemming from these characteristics and practices will be examined individually, though it must be acknowledged that the properties and influence of these challenges are not static and distinct, as all elements of YPAR take place through iterative processes of nearly constant interaction and change.

## Student Factors

The students' ways of engaging in the Haddon Project provided evidence of several factors that complicated their participation in YPAR. These factors included (a) behavioral concerns, (b) nested and overlapping contexts, (c) limiting frames of reference drawn from the middle school environment, (d) mismatched expectations regarding appropriate timelines for progress to be made, and (e) young people's lack of voice in society. In many ways, these natural inclinations and conditions may have created tensions for the students as they adopted YPAR's approach to collaboration and research.

**Behavioral concerns.** The students' occasional tendencies to put down peers, show disrespect, goof around, and resist focusing on the goals of shared tasks could make maximizing the use of the limited time that the group shared difficult. The facilitators expressed discomfort at being put in the awkward position of having to establish order and discipline despite limited experience doing so with young people of this age and also despite a reluctance to undermine the egalitarian orientation of YPAR. Building consensus on rules of behavior and potential consequences was therefore essential. Such agreed-upon rules appeared to play a role in increasing the students' investment in the project as these rules allowed them to assume responsibility for establishing a productive environment. This investment was evident when students initiated "clap backs," a brief sequence of call-and-response clapping to signal the need for classmates to silence side conversations and pay attention, or when students asked that a peer be moved to another chair to stop disrupting the class. However, these procedures were not a panacea. A common concern expressed during university team meetings regarded the need for the facilitators to at times act as "babysitters" and "disciplinarians" when seemingly nothing would persuade the students to remain on task.

**Nested and overlapping contexts.** Between school and home and many points in between, the students operated within varying nested and overlapping contexts. The ways that the interaction between these ecosystems manifested itself in the weekly YPAR meetings at Haddon was sometimes surprising. One example came during a planning session for an upcoming fact-finding meeting with the principal. As the group discussed possible questions they might ask the principal, one of the more invested students suddenly turned disruptive. Private discussion with the student later revealed that he was in the midst of a disciplinary dispute with the principal, and felt uncomfortable engaging with him as a result.

At other times students' participation in the project had the potential to bring negative consequences to their ordinary activities. In the third week, student Sammy asked, "Are they going to be calling our house again?" As it happened, his teacher had not been informed that the principal had selected him to participate in the YPAR meeting during his regularly scheduled class time, and he as a result he had been falsely accused of cutting class.

As the facilitators of the YPAR project sought increasingly broad audiences in their mission to empower youth and foster change for the good, the young participants themselves occasionally faced unforeseen dilemmas as they came to recognize how their actions in one context might impact another. When the lead facilitator suggested that parents be invited to witness the presentation of their research findings regarding lunch quality and their suggestions for

improvements, several students protested, explaining that they were afraid their parents might think them ungrateful for complaining about the food.

Cases such as these marked the rare times when tensions between worlds were made tangible, highlighting the need for facilitators to be thorough as they sought to learn about young participants, seeing the students as whole persons and becoming better informed about the various contexts they move among.

**Limiting frames of reference drawn from the middle school environment.** Because students are socialized into the norms of the school environment, they can often feel a degree of conflict as they engage with the distinct roles and expectations held for participants in YPAR. As Rodríguez and Brown (2009) observed, young people may have difficulty appreciating their own expertise as well as understanding why adults do not always have all the answers. Similarly, the Haddon students required assistance to break out of the typical “adult as authority/student as subordinate” patterns of interaction. Facilitator Sidney later observed, “They are used to doing things for a grade.” Furthermore, “the students are within the context of school, in a classroom, where...teachers are in charge and students need to behave and listen to the teachers. For this reason, it was difficult to try to empower the students to help them stand up on their own against anything going on at their school.” In addition, Sidney noted that the students simply “might not know how to work in this fashion,” for they may not have been accustomed to the kinds of open-ended activity typical of YPAR procedures.

**Mismatched expectations regarding timelines for progress.** The young participants also struggled to appreciate that transformative change, as opposed to ameliorative change, takes time. The need for them to see concrete progress related to their efforts in order to avoid losing interest was evident. As noted by the lead facilitator, “If I was to do this again...I would think through ways to have little ‘wins’ along the way, while still having a longer term outcome.” Highly structured activities with concrete outcomes seemed to suit the students best.

In one of the later university team meetings, the facilitators debated the merits of having themselves complete revisions to the students’ surveys on their own time, revisions which would later be presented to the young participants for their endorsement. Despite concerns that this expanded facilitator responsibility effectively disempowered the students, time constraints necessitated the shift. This approach ultimately proved much more efficient, and held the welcome side effect of inspiring greater student participation as it fostered a sense of progress and momentum.

**Students’ lack of voice.** As young people engage more deeply in YPAR processes, additional issues arise related to their lack of voice in adult society. This can be reflected in awkwardness in their work with the facilitators, as they develop greater knowledge of how to be collegial with adults (Ozer et al., 2010) and learn to communicate in a way that can be heard by adults (Ozer & Wright, 2012). In the Haddon Project, the facilitators found it useful to recall that a transformative target of YPAR may be to challenge the normative privileging of “adult” ways of expression and instead recognize children’s cultural practices of expression (Malone & Hartung, 2010). The lead facilitator’s unique way of valuing students as resources constituted a worthwhile variation on this principle, as she encouraged the other facilitators to see one of the

more behaviorally challenging students as an asset. During a Haddon meeting focused on troubleshooting various scenarios that might cause the students to lose privileges that they had managed to win for the school, the lead facilitator drew attention to an intriguing thought: because the behaviorally challenged student was the kind of person who might be likely to ruin it for everybody when it comes to following the rules, “he’s one of the most special people in the group,” someone who could be a wealth of information about how to reach kids like him in order to maintain the privileges.

### **Facilitator Factors**

Various aspects of facilitators’ ways of approaching and engaging in the Haddon Project could similarly complicate their own and the students’ participation. In this section I explore four such factors. Largest of these was (a) the facilitators’ tendency to presume adult norms for participation, which resulted in sometimes lofty expectations. When these expectations collided with reality, facilitators’ commitment to follow through could be tested. At times the facilitators could also become absorbed in discussions that took place at a level that marginalized the students, inadvertently (b) reinforcing the norm of their lack of voice in adult society. Further difficulties arose from (c) a schedule ill-suited to the youths’ needs as well as from (d) limitations that resulted from the facilitators’ outsider status.

**Presuming adult norms for participation.** Late in the process, many of the facilitators came to believe that the students were not very invested in the project, and the more this perception took hold, the more the facilitators found themselves struggling to maintain their own enthusiasm. As facilitator Jessie put it, “Student engagement was definitely the biggest challenge to this project.” This belief in student apathy stemmed from judgments the facilitators made regarding students’ participation during and between sessions, drawing from general trends as well as from specific moments that seemed highly indicative of the students’ level of (dis)engagement.

Students’ participation during the meetings often fell short of facilitators’ expectations. At times “students would...zone out which would greatly hinder our productivity,” Jessie noted, and despite the facilitators’ exhortations to the contrary, students rarely took any notes during important discussions, even though they had been given university notebooks and pens at the second meeting as gifts. Students’ contributions to discussions were often off-topic or nonserious, and in several cases their suggested solutions to problems amounted to thinly veiled attempts to get out of more classes, such as when student Guillermo repeatedly pressed for the group to put on an assembly, insisting that it be held during a class he did not like. “Each session we had felt a little like it was two steps forward followed by one step back,” facilitator Pat commented.

The facilitators were similarly unimpressed with students’ work between sessions. Jessie noted, “Students didn’t seem to take ownership and would continually fail to come to our meetings prepared.” Pat concurred, saying, “As all of us know, only a handful of students did any of the ‘homework’ we assigned.”

Isolated interactions and behaviors seemed to crystallize the students’ lack of investment, such as a snippet of small talk preceding a preholiday session:

Lead Facilitator: Are you going to miss us during the Thanksgiving break? We're not going to see you guys next week.

Student Jennie: No comment.

At another time a facilitator challenged student Miguel to focus his efforts in order to make sure the project would not amount to a waste of time. Miguel responded, "The project won't be a failure no matter what, because it got us out of class."

Perhaps most indicative of students' disinterest were the students' actions. In the third week of the project, when the students had the opportunity to vote for a topic to focus on, only eight of the 14 raised their hands. In two later meetings, Manuel, a student from the Activities group, attempted to shirk responsibility by fading into the background of the Lunch group. Meanwhile, though the number of attendees varied from week to week, there was a general downward trend in attendance, with numbers hitting a low in the second-to-last meeting as only nine of the 14 original participants attended.

Despite the damning nature of this collection of evidence, it may not be wholly accurate to judge these behaviors as purely representative of disinterest, as such patterns of participation and discourse might simply be the norm for students at their particular developmental stages and in their particular school culture, and some of the nonproductive modes of participation may also have been more indicative of a lack of academic skills than anything else (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). Indeed, in surveys administered to the students after the project had been completed (Table 2), students expressed predominantly favorable opinions of the process and its relevance to them. Eleven of 12 respondents shared that they were glad they had participated in this group, and that they had put a lot of time and effort into being a member. Furthermore, all 12 stated that being a member of the group was important to them, that they saw being a member of the group as a part of their identity, and that they felt their work together had been a success.

Table 2

*Student Survey Responses*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Improving the food at our school is important to me.			1	3	8	12
Getting the field open for more time during lunch is important to me.		1	3	4	4	12
Having more sports available during lunch time is important to me.		1	2	4	5	12

I am glad I participated in this group.	1	2	9	12	
I feel our work together has been a success.		2	10	12	
Making a survey for our school was a valuable activity.		1	4	7	12
I liked our meetings because I got to talk about school problems.		1	2	9	12
I liked our meetings because I got to miss class.	2	1	4	3	10
I liked our meetings because I learned how to do research.		2	4	6	12
I liked our meetings because I got to talk to the principal.		0.5	3	8.5	12
I liked our meetings because I got to talk to the lunch people.			3	8	11
I liked our meetings because I learned how to stand up for myself.		1	4	6	11
I liked our meetings because I got to spend time with people from the university.		1	2	8	11
I liked our meetings because I got to work with other students.		1	5	6	12
I liked our meetings because I got snacks.	1	3	5	3	12
I liked our meetings because I got a notebook and pen from the university.		1	7	2	10
I get important needs of mine met because I am part of this group.		1	5	6	12
Other people in this group and I value the same things.		1	4	7	12

People in this group have similar needs, priorities, and goals.	3	5	4	12	
I know the names of most people in this group.		4	8	12	
Most of the people in this group know me.		8	4	12	
If there is a problem at this school, students in this group can get it solved.	1	2	3	6	12
This group has good leaders.		0.5	3.5	8	12
It is very important to me to be a part of this group.			4	8	12
This group can influence the school.		0.5	5.5	6	12
I have influence over what this group is like.	1	1	3	7	12
I put a lot of time and effort into being a member of this group.		1	3	8	12
Being a member of this group is a part of my identity.			4	8	12

It appears that when the facilitators came to the conclusion that the students were not invested, they may not have been using an appropriate yardstick. The form of young people's involvement is a matter that requires great scrutiny. To the field of child participation, Hart (1992) famously contributed a "ladder of children's participation" in which the lowest rungs—manipulation, decoration, and tokenism—depicted forms of nonparticipation, while the higher rungs extended to a pinnacle in which projects "are initiated by young people who then share decisions with adults" (Malone & Hartung, 2010, p. 27). It may be inferred that this highest rung should be the constant intended aim of YPAR, but Hart (1997) himself has cautioned rather that children should have the option of participating at a level of their choosing, at any stage of the process. This idea is echoed in what the lead facilitator noticed at Haddon, wherein "different students were engaged to different degrees. Each week, the students that participated/contributed the most varied."

In order for the facilitators to provide support and be effective guides, it was crucial that they maintain their own enthusiasm for and commitment to the YPAR project. Failure to use an appropriate yardstick for interpreting the students' participation jeopardized such commitment, for it resulted in frustration and disillusionment when reality fell short of expectations. Pat came to question the value of the whole process, admitting to having "a hard time recognizing and thinking about the process as an important outcome...I found it hard to orient myself to the goal of having the students come up with the project and methods for completing the project when it seems like we could have come up with other methods that could better (or more quickly) achieve the goal." Reflecting on the experience, Jessie said, "I often felt frustrated...I would probably not want to do this again." In my own field notes from the eighth week I too expressed frustration, asking, "What are we doing spending our time there, particularly at this busy time of the year, when we are not appreciated?"

**Inadvertent marginalization.** YPAR facilitators are no different from anyone else in their need to develop a critical awareness of how their own cultural practices impact upon students' participation (Duckett et al., 2010; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Even those who seek to empower young people may partake in their marginalization, making change in an adult-controlled school environment particularly difficult to achieve (Phillips et al., 2010).

As university academics, the facilitators held particular views regarding the need for thoroughness and clarity when conducting worthwhile research, and these beliefs in presumed research norms could lead to inadvertent marginalization of the young participants. This was most evident when the Activities group worked on creation of surveys to be administered to the student body. As the facilitators raised concern after concern in a discussion that spanned four sessions regarding potential misinterpretation of the wording of survey items, the student participants withdrew, seemingly waiting for the facilitators to address these higher level issues that only they found problematic. Importantly, the facilitators may not have been cognizant of this marginalization, as in later debriefing discussions they sometimes misattributed the facilitators' own ideas to the students (e.g., "They want to ask the principal if they can change the consequence of breaking the rules.").

**Scheduling concerns.** The facilitators held nine meetings with the youth at Haddon. Each meeting lasted 90 minutes, and the meetings were held once per week. This schedule accorded with facilitators' needs by minimizing the amount of time necessary for commuting and logistics, but it starkly contrasted with the students' routine, which consisted of a daily schedule divided into periods of no more than 50 minutes. In retrospect, the lead facilitator recognized the limitations of this schedule, stating, "Once a week is infrequent and 90 minutes is too long for one sitting...a lot of motivation and enthusiasm is lost from week to week and from the start to end of our meetings." Other facilitators made similar comments and surmised that the one-week intervals between meetings contributed to the students' difficulty remembering to do the homework.

An additional scheduling drawback was the limited number of weeks. Because the facilitators could only dedicate a little over two months for the project, they faced pressure to make progress quickly. Facilitators later shared that at times this pressure inclined them to take control of proceedings that were actually better suited to collaboration, thus posing an obstacle to building

positive working relationships, fostering participation, and developing buy-in. For example, as meetings approached their conclusions, facilitators would become increasingly directive, taking the lead for generating ideas and taking notes, or giving problem-solving advice rather than helping the youth come to conclusions for themselves. Furthermore, time constraints frequently forced productive activities to premature conclusions and shortchanged the time for debriefing and joint planning with the students.

**Outsider status.** The facilitators' status as outsiders resulted in further drawbacks and unintended consequences. Due to their limited presence at the school and limited interaction with teachers, administrators, students, and their parents, the facilitators did not have direct channels of communication with students between meetings. Facilitators thus had limited or no means to let students know about revisions to plans, to send reminders, to check in on their progress with research homework, or even to find out the reasons for absences. Facilitators' unfamiliarity with the internal workings of the school led to loss of time due to such matters as changing Wi-Fi passwords and to inefficiencies when the facilitators unknowingly made plans that conflicted with idiosyncrasies in the school calendar. In addition, because the facilitators were not established members of the school with a space to call their own, the YPAR group's meeting location was subject to change at a moment's notice and without word getting out to all student participants, which could result in student absences.

As outsiders, the facilitators also lacked information about the student body and about the students who had been selected for the project. In order for the YPAR project to be of the greatest value to the community it served, it was essential that the participants be representative of their community. For instance, if a school were 98% Asian, female, and GATE-eligible, a YPAR group composed mostly of students from other demographics would be less likely to represent the needs and interests of the school population at large. Though the group seemed representative on the level of ethnicity, age, and gender, the facilitators had no other metrics by which to judge the representativeness of this cohort of student participants, nor power to influence the cohort's composition.

The facilitators' lack of detailed information regarding the student body and the YPAR participants diminished the facilitators' ability to interpret the young participants' contributions in light of the broader school context and needs. The more vocal members of this group pressed for changes to the menu and for the reinstatement of lunchtime activity privileges, but when these same students largely failed to follow through on collecting the opinions of their peers, the facilitators had little means to ascertain the true relevance of these issues to the student body at large.

Facilitators were also outsiders in the sense that none shared the students' ethnic and cultural background. For this reason, the student participants may also have had doubts that their worldview would be valued and their interests represented. Though tensions in this area never became overtly evident, the potential for this cultural mismatch to have a subtle influence on the proceedings cannot be denied.

## Discussion

Thus far this paper has identified a large number of student- and facilitator-related factors that can negatively influence the nature of a YPAR project. These factors include facilitators' outsider status, as well as their tendency to presume adult norms for participation which inadvertently reinforces the norm of young people's lack of voice in adult society, and scheduling sessions in a fashion that is ill-suited to the students' needs. Complications can also arise in relation to students' disruptive behaviors, their struggle to function in nested and overlapping contexts, their lack of voice in society, and their difficulty adapting to typical YPAR practices. Though many of the complications faced in the Haddon Project were born of the characteristics and behaviors that the students and facilitators naturally brought to it, there are a number of basic practices facilitators can employ to address them. Based on the experience of the participants in the Haddon Project, and informed by literature on YPAR and on child participation, the following guidelines can be suggested:

- Exercise strong leadership in a principled, purposeful fashion.
- Invest in getting to know the site and the participants.
- Address the mismatch between the adolescents' developmental stages and the requirements of YPAR.
- Structure YPAR activities in a fashion to increase students' participation.

**Exercising strong leadership.** Though young people will tend to view adult participants as authorities by default, the Haddon facilitators struggled to reconcile the exercise of power with the egalitarian ideals of YPAR. Facilitator Skyler wondered, "I know [YPAR is] meant to be more of a collaboration and we are to be helping the students meet their objectives, but does assigning the students things to do somehow tip the balance a little (or more like reaffirm the balance that we > students in that we can tell them what to do)?" The lead facilitator summarized the challenge involved in establishing order as not wanting to say, "It's participatory and if you don't do it right we will kick you out." Consequently, the facilitators elected to share power by inviting the students to help generate a list of rules and consequences for appropriate participation. Though the students' contributions were largely limited to slight variations on a theme (e.g., "don't kick," "don't hit," "don't smack") and the students' suggestions for consequences unquestioningly replicated the strict punishments they may have been accustomed to receiving, some evidence of the success of this approach came at those times when the students would later police themselves when agreed-upon rules were broken.

Though the relationship between power and the pursuit of YPAR aims is multifaceted and complex, a robust case is made in the literature for strong leadership on the part of the facilitators. Gruber and Trickett (2005), in their broader work with school stakeholders, argue that effective use of power in this form "is essential to the successful establishment of an egalitarian decision-making body" (p. 368). Grande (cited in Tuck, 2009) notes that "when framed through...balance[,] it becomes clear that power and responsibility can never be equally shared, nor should they. Elders have very different roles, responsibilities, and levels of power in a community, as do men, women, and children but when considered *as a whole*, they act in

balance to each other” (p. 60). In their YPAR work with Latina/o and black young people, Rodríguez and Brown (2009) make no apologies for embracing power in a relational sense, for the purpose of building relationships and fostering collaboration. Furthermore, as the adult participants in Nygreen et al.’s (2006) YPAR project note, “Some adult knowledge *is* important in working with youth, and it would be disingenuous to not bring that forward” (p. 116). Although,

ultimately you do want the youth to...make all the important decisions. But then you also want to recognize that...[we] do know more about organizing than they do. And there has to be some process where, you know, [our] wisdom and the wisdom of the other staff can be passed along to the youth and then the youth can make decisions. (p. 116)

One option Nygreen et al. (2006) suggest is to recognize that in any YPAR project, there will be certain “nonnegotiables” related to participation in the project, and that adult allies should be transparent from the outset about these and about which activities are to be adult-led. Even within such practice there is room for power to be shared, as young participants can be invited to come up with their own set of nonnegotiables as well.

**Getting to know the site and participants.** As outsiders, the facilitators lacked channels for communication and for accessing useful information, and they may have been compromised in their ability to build trust with the student participants. It would have been wise for the university team to invite the participation of trusted teachers as well as other adults from the students’ home community, and it would also have been beneficial for the facilitators to take the time to be more of a presence at the school prior to the beginning of the project. As Phillips et al. (2010) share:

In retrospect, rather than proceeding without ethnographic knowledge of the school community, the researchers should have spent at least six months to a year in the classroom with the teachers and students establishing a relationship and gaining an understanding of the context in which the PAR intervention would have occurred. (p. 192)

Haddon facilitators’ lack of information about the students made it hard for them to appreciate the nested and overlapping contexts that young people function within. The facilitators may also have had better luck getting to know the students and facilitating their participation if they had, in addition to spending more time in the school, spent more time with the students outside of school, holding the YPAR meetings at an external location. Because schools replicate the adultist dynamic of society, they limit the opportunities for students to have a say in their own education (Ozer et al., 2010). This prevailing culture can similarly make it difficult for young people to fully participate in YPAR, as was the case when the Haddon facilitators tweaked survey questions for great lengths of time while the students largely observed from the sidelines.

Nygreen et al. found that changing the YPAR meeting venue from the school setting to an off-campus location “produced a dramatic and positive shift in the ways dialogue and meetings took place” (2006, p. 117). In the case of the Haddon Project, a shift to holding meetings at the facilitators’ university may have been particularly appropriate and beneficial, for the lead

facilitator had already gone to lengths to foster students' sense of connection to the university by giving university notebooks and pens as gifts, referring to the young participants as "college students," and floating the idea of visiting the university to share findings and tour the campus. Though the logistics of arranging bus transportation and clearing sufficient time from the school schedule would likely have been formidable, additional benefits may have been reaped as it would have driven home the importance placed on the students' participation, and the students would have had greater opportunity to form a distinct group identity.

### **Addressing the mismatch between developmental stages and YPAR practices.**

Though the university cohort generally held reservations about imposing top-down direction, highly structured activities with concrete outcomes seemed best suited to fostering the Haddon students' intrinsic interest, such as an inept survey activity in which students experienced the challenges of answering poorly worded questions and a question-generating session in preparation for an impending interview with the principal. Indeed, of all the photos taken from the various YPAR sessions, the students appear most engaged in the shots taken during a practice survey activity in which the students quickly collected data on fellow YPAR participants' opinions and came up with pie charts to summarize results.

Additional developmentally and culturally appropriate classroom practices may have brought further success, particularly those that reflect current best practices in the field of middle level education, such as those outlined in the National Middle School Association's (2003) position statement. The facilitators themselves suggested that simple acts typical of the school environment such as taking attendance, recording homework completion, and giving recognition for special effort may serve as ways of celebrating participation, though the exercise of power inherent in these practices may be incongruent with typical approaches to YPAR. Instruction in basic study skills might have helped as well, such as taking notes, using graphic organizers, and recording assignments in a daily planner. When the students largely failed to collect useful data, facilitator Skyler wondered if it was "because they did not exactly know what we were asking them to do." Skyler suggested that facilitators explicitly walk the students through the process, guiding them through the data collection personally "so they know how they could gather data (take pictures of the trashcan, [check] off different items on the list, etc.)."

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**Nurturing appropriate participation.** Finally, the students' apparent lack of investment was a topic of much consideration and speculation for the facilitators. Regardless of whether their investment was abnormally low or their limited forms of participation were developmentally appropriate, the facilitators felt a responsibility to stimulate greater participation.

The lead facilitator reflected that in a future project she would "try to structure more deliverables from the students along the way. . . If they had to bring something (pictures, charts, observations) every couple of days, they would be more engaged and committed to the project." In addition,

although Haddon students had picked the topics and were interested in them, she recognized that they were not passionate about them. She suggested that it would be better to start with a Photovoice project to facilitate greater critical awareness and to help students identify research topics that they were more passionate about.

Another means of increasing participation would be to support autonomy, beginning by giving students a choice regarding whether or not to participate in the project, for as Ozer and Douglas (2013) note, there is high likelihood that students who are already interested in the process will achieve the most success. Many of the facilitators surmised that the fact that the students had not initially had the opportunity to opt into the program had affected the students' investment, and they suggested that the success of any future project would depend on working with interested volunteers.

Facilitators may also seek to stimulate investment through the development of good group dynamics. In doing so, McMillan and Chavis's (1986) definition of "sense of community" can provide a useful guide: participants can work to develop "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p.9). At the same time, facilitators should foster members' influence, or the sense that they matter to the group, and their sense of having a shared history.

Although such measures may prove effective for increasing investment, it is also important for facilitators to maintain realistic expectations for young people's participation. As Malone and Hartung (2010) see it,

What...is needed in the field of children's participation is to entice practitioners, children, and researchers to be more playful and creative in the relationships they form, to acknowledge that children's culture exists independently of adults, and to think of new ways to interact with children where we are opening up rather than closing down dialogue, and so building an environment that includes all the possibilities of children's participation, even those we haven't thought of. (p. 36-37)

Adherents to such views will naturally recognize that children's forms of participation and expression should take forms suited to the children themselves, as opposed to being fitted to the molds adults find appropriate (Malone & Hartung, 2010).

At Haddon, the facilitators may have at times been guilty of being too eager and of not patiently waiting for students to participate, as when facilitators took notes or generated ideas while the students sat back and watched, or when brainstorming sessions on issues in need of attention shifted from the students' generation of ideas to the facilitators providing problem-solving advice. In addition, "pair and share" activities may have been of value for fostering participation, in which students are given time to work with a partner to generate responses to a prompt before sharing their answers with the group as a whole. Nygreen et al. (2006) suggest that a balance of encouragement and guidance without domination is the key, and that this might be accomplished if the adults simply kept silent more often, granting others "more time to think, participate, and express themselves as well as gain further ownership of the project" (p. 116).

In sum, the act of undertaking a YPAR project is no small endeavor. To be successful, facilitators must possess great self-awareness and the ability to place themselves in the shoes of the young people with whom they work. Countless complications will arise throughout the process, many of which will be as unavoidable as they are self-inflicted, seemingly written into both adult and student participants' DNA. Yet the battle to surmount such challenges is well worth the effort, for YPAR has the power to transform discussions of issues that affect young people, creating channels through which they can inform the debates and even act as change agents themselves.

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